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Learning Lesson

Not many Americans, surely, have forgotten the U2 affair. Those whose recollections may have become blurred may have their memories of that tragic episode refreshed with the publication soon of "The U2 Affair" written by David Wise and Thomas B. Ross.

There is nothing in American history quite like that affair. When the plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers went down 1,200 miles inside Soviet Russia a chain reaction set in that shook the world. Of all the figures in that incident perhaps no one was so touched with tragedy as President Dwight D. Eisenhower. He assumed full responsibility for the flight and saw his dream of being remembered in history as a peace-maker exploded in the brutal disruption by Nikita S. Khrushchev of the summit conference in Paris.

The saddest part of all is that no one appears to have learned any lessons from the incident. James Hagerly, the President's press secretary at the time, seemed to sum up the public feeling when he said that the lesson to be learned was don't get caught.

Practically all the official difficulties that arose from the U2 flight that failed, however, can be traced to the breach of a convention as old as military intelligence. The unvarying rule has been to deny officially the existence of any espionage activities on our part. Throughout history spies have been caught and executed without any expression of official interest on the part of their countries. The convention has made it possible for nations to live with espionage and counter-espionage.

Contrast, for instance, the Russian attitude

toward Col. Rudolf Abel, caught and convicted of spying in the U. S., who was finally exchanged for Powers. Russia consistently took the attitude that Abel was not and never had been a spy.

The U2 affair, together with the Cuban invasion fiasco, may have broken the power of the Central Intelligence Agency to collect intelligence as well as direct policy. Congress may not insist that a select "watchdog" committee be appointed to oversee the CIA, but there is evidence, if not official confirmation, that the direction of policy has been taken firmly away from the CIA and lodged where it belongs, in the highest echelons of the executive department. If so the U2 has taught us one lesson of value.